




TAKING IT TO STRE



Clockwise from top left:
Pets for Life coordinator Janice Poleon discusses spay/neuter with a resident in Philadelphia's Hunting Park neighborhood, assisted by neighbor Betty Hill; volunteer Cornelius Payton holds court at a Chicago outreach event; in Los Angeles, a young man and his cat lounge at an outreach event; Kasey Gardner and his dog Kane rest while waiting for free vaccinations in Chicago; a cat rides to a Los Angeles event in a bike basket, one alternate transport method used by those without cars, leashes, or carriers.





Block by block, The HSUS's Pets for Life program is bringing the human touch to neighborhoods where pet care services are scarce but love for animals abounds.

by MICHAEL SHARP

THE ETS



On the concrete front porch of this rundown row house, along a narrow street in a rough neighborhood named Hunting Park, eight men sit outside drinking one October afternoon. Two pit bulls and a small dog lie at their feet; the adjoining house next door has boards across its first-floor windows.

These men watch skeptically as a stranger approaches.

Kenny Lamberti is just weeks into his job as Philadelphia manager for The HSUS's Pets for Life program. And already he's been cautioned, more than once, that perhaps it'd be better to just avoid this stretch of town, this house in particular.

"What's going on?" Lamberti says, with a wave.

Silence.

A few stares.

And finally, from one of the men: "You looking for somebody?"

No, Lamberti tells them, introducing himself. He points to the good-looking pair of pit bulls, asking where they came from. He tells them he has one himself at home, his beloved Ruben. Others start to mention their dogs. Slowly, the conversation begins to loosen.

Eventually, Lamberti explains why he's out learning these streets: The HSUS has targeted this neighborhood with a new program to help pet owners. He mentions that he's a dog trainer and the program offers free classes. This piques the interest of one man

whose German shepherd is apparently scaring everyone.

After about 45 minutes, Lamberti hands them new leashes and collars—items he's carried for precisely these moments—and tells them he'll be back. At least one of the men is still skeptical: "We'll see about that."

But he does return. One day, he brings more collars, more leashes, and some much-needed flea and tick medication. Another day, he drops off Pets for Life T-shirts. In the weeks that follow, these men—among them former gang members recently released from prison, trying to move forward with their lives—will help spread the word about this initiative to assist pets and their owners in inner-city communities. In the weeks that follow, these men, on their own, will direct dozens of new people to free rabies vaccinations, to free spay/neuter appointments, to those dog training classes.

But on Lamberti's fourth visit, it's decided they'll simply take their dogs out through the neighborhood. And so they walk—eight men, five dogs. "Hey, do you guys know other people that have dogs?" Lamberti asks them, still trying to get a feel for pet owners in Hunting Park.

Kenny Lamberti (left) and Devell Brookins (right) speak with Stu Love, who will later become a Pets for Life volunteer in Philadelphia.

They point out homes. These people have dogs. This lady feeds all the neighborhood cats. At one point, a woman leans out her window and examines this peculiar parade; most of the men happen to be wearing their new black T-shirts. She yells out: “You all look like a gang of peace.”

Eleven months later, Lamberti still chuckles at the thought of that moment, that gang of peace. “That’s Pets for Life, really,” he says. “It just started with saying hello.”

IT'S A UNIQUE APPROACH, hitting these streets, helping these pets who have historically flown under the radar in the animal welfare world, and doing it all by, first and foremost, building relationships with the pet owners.

The HSUS operates Pets for Life programs in targeted neighborhoods of four cities: Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, and most recently, Los Angeles. The program evolved, in part, from the organization’s post-Katrina campaign in the Gulf Coast, where intensive market research began to debunk the animal sheltering community’s longstanding notion that urban pet owners were ideologically opposed to spay/neuter. Rather, the research showed that cost and lack of information were bigger roadblocks—and that simply getting out and starting conversations, offering free spay/neuter vouchers, and holding large-scale outreach events clearly made an impact.

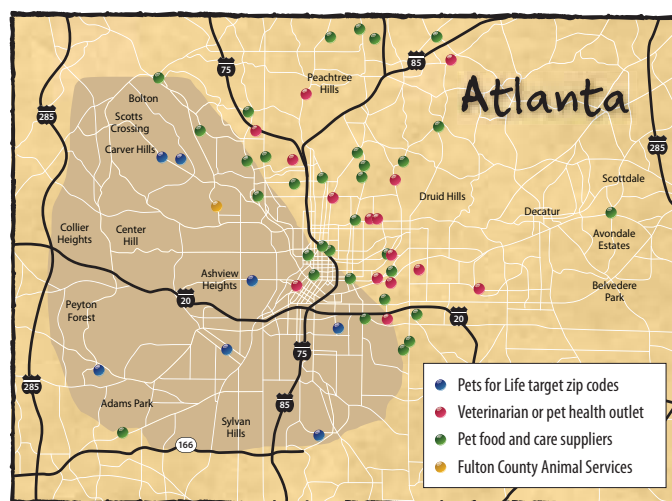
Today the program reaches underserved, often overlooked neighborhoods chosen not only for their poverty levels but for their lack of access to pet care resources, particularly for residents without cars. The notion of food deserts in the United States has gained steam recently—areas without access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and other items needed for a healthy diet—and this program seeks to address the pet care deserts that often accompany them.

So far, the results have been extraordinary: In 2012, Pets for Life

helped more than 10,000 animals with free services like vaccinations, spay/neuter, training classes, new leashes and collars, food, flea and tick medication, and one-on-one advice for pet owners.

Just as important: This program buzzes and builds with a contagious, pay-it-forward momentum. It’s evident within the four targeted cities, where new clients regularly become new advocates and volunteers. And it’s evident beyond, as grants from PetSmart Charities have enabled The HSUS to mentor groups in 10 more cities, from Phoenix to Milwaukee to Camden, N.J.

“We’re never naïve,” Lamberti says. “We don’t think all of the sudden the streets are going to be lined with rainbows and chocolate fountains. The suffering is still going to be there, but you’re going to



The HSUS’s Pets for Life program seeks to address pet care deserts like the one depicted in brown on this community assessment map. For those residents in underserved communities who don’t have cars, access to pet food, supplies, veterinarians, and other services can be even more limited.

make improvements, and it's going to stabilize on some level. And every block that you move to, you build your little army with you."

Indeed, Pets for Life doesn't just reach out to these communities, it embeds within them—engaging pet owners who traditionally have not visited shelters, or called animal control, or in many cases, made a vet appointment. That was another lesson learned in the wake of Katrina:

The push to reduce pet overpopulation, to relieve suffering, had to expand beyond the animals entering shelters, as hundreds of thousands more were never making it there in the first place.

"It's not just about spay/neuter. And it's not just about dogfighting.

And it's not just about chaining," says Pets for Life director Amanda Arrington, a driving force behind the creation and implementation of the program. "It's about all of these things that haven't been addressed and that we need to, as a field, take a look at and see where we're failing these pets and where we're failing these pet owners."

City block by city block, success stories are now emerging. Take it from J.C. Ramos, a care manager in a Philadelphia recovery house for Latino men just out of jail or detox. The program funded vaccinations and spay/neuter for his five dogs and three cats.

"There's a lot of people who have good intentions and really love their pets, but good intentions don't count at the end of the day," he says. "It's good that programs like this exist because there's people who would give their lives for their dogs. Like me, I don't mind skipping a meal every once in a while ... as long as my dogs have what they need. Sadly, there's people who can't afford it."

Or take it from Victoria Santiago, a faithful volunteer who lives a stone's throw from Ramos: "No matter what I do, I'm never going to be able to repay what you guys have done for me and my family, my community, my friends. So, thank you."

AN ENERGETIC BROWN PIT BULL with a white chest and paws, King has developed something of a bad habit. When walking on a leash, he likes to buck, spin, and hop—often in one wild motion.

Alongside a Hunting Park football field, Pets for Life community organizer Devell Brookins offers some advice. He's been working consistently with Megan Carman, owner of year-old King and Queen, and they usually meet at her house, where she's trying to transition the dogs from her enclosed porch to living inside for winter. Today, as part of a weekly Saturday training session that's open to the public, Brookins instructs her to stop walking when King starts bucking, to use treats to train the dog's focus back onto her. He plans to bring her an easy-walk harness as well.

The training has already helped Carman, a first-time pit bull owner, learn to handle the pair. And without this program, without Brookins occasionally dropping off a bag of dog food when money

*I don't mind skipping
a meal every once
in a while ... as
long as my dogs have
what they need.*

— J.C. RAMOS

J.C. Ramos
and his wife,
Elizabeth
Lopez



While training a group in Baton Rouge, La., Pets for Life director Amanda Arrington fills out a spay/neuter voucher for a man whose dog has given birth to an estimated 15 litters. The HSUS's Kenny Lamberti says of Arrington: "Her mission in life is—and they're both equal—to help people in underserved communities and their pets. This is her life's work. It really is."

Victoria Santiago





Ever since Pets for Life helped him train his exuberant pit bull Bonnie, Khalif Edwards has only missed volunteering at one outreach event in Philadelphia. And he had a good excuse. "I wasn't going to miss it," he says, before adding with a laugh: "I actually got married the day before the event. And I was going to get up and come, but I didn't want to ruin the honeymoon."



From left: The HSUS's Kris Badillo, Laurie Maxwell, and Angela Love join Denise Compton (red shirt) and Mayhem.



Megan Carman, with Queen and King

gets tight, she says she wouldn't be able to keep them. "The dogs are a big help," says Carman, mentioning her son suffers from ADHD. "Sometimes when he has his rough days, he'll go out and sit with the dogs. So it's almost like the dogs are helping me keep him OK."

The Atlanta, Chicago, and Philadelphia programs grew from The HSUS's former End Dogfighting campaign, where training classes were designed to bond pit bull-type dogs and their owners. The classes are now open to dogs of all breeds; in Philadelphia's nine-week class, for example, Mickey the little Yorkie mix is working toward graduation—training that's also helping him in his day job as a therapy dog at a nursing home.

Hour-long beginner and advanced classes cover everything from sitting and staying to dealing with distractions and obeying the always valuable "Leave it!" command. But this is just one part of the week for Pets for Life staff, who spend most of their time walking the streets, knocking on doors, and working the phones—often one block at a time. The efforts pay off at large community outreach events—held about once a quarter—where hundreds of pet owners line up through parks or down city blocks to receive free rabies and distemper/parvo vaccinations. The events serve as another valuable platform to discuss the benefits of spay/neuter; staff work the long lines with free vouchers, later making follow-up phone calls, setting up appointments, even offering to drive pets to their surgeries.

The teams keep breaking their own records for the number of animals vaccinated at the events. With the help of Baltimore-based Illume Communications, the program tracks these stats relentlessly. What's emerging is a groundbreaking set of data from more than 20,000 clients, data that can start to paint valuable pictures like: How much contact does it take, on average, before a 30-year-old Latino woman agrees to spay her Chihuahua?

Still, it's the stories behind those numbers that form the heart of the program. Like the woman so nervous about her son's pit bull getting spayed that she called for updates throughout the day, affixed a "Welcome home, Jewel" sign above her door, then greeted the dog by ladling warm soup into her food bowl.

Or the two clients who invited Philadelphia Pets for Life coordinator Janice Poleon to their vow renewal ceremony. When she arrived, the seating chart for Table No. 1 read: "Mother of the Bride; Father of the Bride; Janice, HSUS." At one point, she remembers, the husband took the mic: "I just want to thank everybody for coming, especially Janice with The Humane Society of the United States, who is a big friend to all of us and to our animals. Here, Janice, say a few words."

At the reception that followed, 10 more people signed their pets up for spay/neuter operations.

YEARS BEFORE she would crisscross the Gulf Coast in a rental car, years before she would then spearhead the launch of Pets for Life in the fall of 2011, Arrington spent a sleepless night in her Durham, N.C., home—both nervous and excited for what the next day might bring.

Arrington was launching her new nonprofit, Coalition to Unchain Dogs. On this Saturday, she would be walking door-to-door for the first time. She'd printed fliers on her computer, ready to talk



to owners about alternatives to leaving their dogs tied up outside.

The very first house Arrington approached belonged to a woman named Ms. Harris. She knocked, and a face peered from behind a window curtain. They locked eyes. But the door never opened. Arrington left a note, then came back the next Saturday. This time, Ms. Harris opened the door but left her screen door shut, allowing Arrington to talk about her program, which requires clients only to sign up for a free spay/neuter appointment to receive a free fence.

On that second visit, Arrington got a casual, “OK, leave me your number,” and so she returned the Saturday after that. This time, both doors opened.

Eventually, Ms. Harris agreed to get her three dogs neutered, including Spot the pit bull, who was living on the front porch in a carpet-covered crate. Spot belonged to her grandson, who was in jail at the time. Arrington drove the dogs to their appointments, and one weekend, volunteers built a backyard fence, giving the dogs a space to run free.

“The basis of all of this with Pets for Life was just that lesson of, you have to build trust and you have to build those relationships, and Ms. Harris really taught me that,” Arrington says. “And it wasn’t because she didn’t care, and it wasn’t because she was a bad person. It was just that I was a stranger in her neighborhood, and she had to make sure that I was OK. And I get that.”

And so, Pets for Life emphasizes building those relationships. It emphasizes showing respect, setting aside judgment, creating a consistent presence, and setting realistic goals. The core principles revolve around the simple, powerful acts of showing up, coming back, and making good on your word—particularly in communities all too familiar with being let down.

That approach hasn’t gone unnoticed.

Standing on his porch, his papillons perusing their fenced-in, concrete front yard, Ramos, the recovery center manager, is asked why Pets for Life has found a foothold in Philadelphia, why people like him and his wife have begun volunteering.

“It’s real people working for real people,” he says. “When I first spoke to Janice, and then I met [other staffers], it wasn’t like, ‘Greetings Earthlings, we are gathered here to help you with your problems. Just come to us. We are here to help you.’ It was more like, ‘How you doing? Long time no see.’ It was the human contact. And plus, it’s people who really love their pets. They don’t do this for a paycheck. They do this

Record-setting numbers at recent Pets for Life events:

Chicago, Sept. 22:

419 pets vaccinated; spay/neuter vouchers distributed for 73 percent of unaltered pets (246 of 339)

Los Angeles, Sept. 29:

429 vaccinations; vouchers distributed for 96 percent of unaltered pets (284 of 296)

Philadelphia, Nov. 10:

615 vaccinations; vouchers distributed for 64 percent of unaltered pets (329 of 517)

because they love what they do.”

In the Chicago community of North Lawndale, where 45 percent of residents are living below the poverty line, where racial and gang tensions persist with neighboring South Lawndale, Pets for Life manager Laurie Maxwell had been, for weeks, keeping an eye on a boarded-up house. There were often two pit bulls out front, but she could never get their owner, Del Smith, to come out and talk. Through a window, Maxwell even asked for a phone number; Smith instead offered to take hers. She never called.

Finally, out driving one night, Maxwell saw her standing alongside an ice cream truck. She stopped quickly and hustled over. “I was so looking forward to meeting with you,” she told

Smith. “Let’s talk.” And so Maxwell bought her a chocolate ice cream cone, and the two finally chatted there under the train tracks—Smith telling her she could opt for public housing but she didn’t want to give up her dogs, Momma and Rocky. Instead, she would continue slipping in and out through a basement opening in that boarded-up building.


That night, Smith agreed to let Pets for Life pay for Momma’s spay. The program eventually helped spay the puppies from Momma’s final, accidental litter as well, while Smith in turn has introduced Maxwell to most everyone on her block. “We talk all the time,” Maxwell says. “She’s a beautiful woman who loves her dogs so much that she’s going to stay in this situation in order to keep them.”

BRANDIT is an unlikely Casanova.

The 14-year-old Pomeranian is deaf. He’s going blind with cataracts. And he sits here now, shaking in the arms of his owner. Yet this small dog has fathered at least a dozen litters, earning his name



Devell Brookins, shown here with his dog Ace, has worked his way from student to volunteer to community organizer and dog trainer.



Pet owners line up along a neighborhood block for an outreach event in Chicago.

by “branding” each of Betty Hill’s female Chihuahuas.

Oh, she tried. The woman Janice Poleon affectionately calls “Ms. Betty” kept Brandit fenced apart from the females in her backyard. Come wintertime, she would prop his crate up off the basement floor to keep the girls from getting to him. Still, they found a way.

Hill explored spay/neuter; the cost was just too much. But then, it also became too much, over the last two litters, to watch four tiny puppies die—the result, she’s sure, of Brandit’s age. “That’s what broke me down,” she says, “... the puppies I couldn’t save.”

And so, on her daughter’s recommendation, Hill turned to Pets for Life, which funded operations not only for Brandit but for her other six dogs and one cat. “When I got the message that they were spaying and neutering them, I thought that was a blessed thing,” she says. “... So what I did [was] tried to instill that around somebody else maybe who thought the same way I did.”

Clearly, the woman is now on a mission.

Hill has single-handedly helped Pets for Life sign up an additional 48 animals for spay/neuter appointments, including a dizzying 40 in one afternoon. She can rattle off a list of who’s been neutered in the neighborhood and who’s holding out. Armed with a water gun, she’s on guard to keep the unaltered male cats from up the street away from the last of the unspayed females. Heck, on this Saturday, she’ll even walk Pets for Life staff down the block to meet another neighbor, who leans out her window and signs up her Chihuahua for an appointment.

The black-and-white cat lying against the house across the street is most definitely in her crosshairs. “I’ve got my eyes on her,” Hill

says, raising her voice slightly as if to give the cat fair warning—though there is a little wait with this one, as she’s somewhat recently given birth. “Eight weeks more. I’ve got her clocked.”

In many ways, Hill symbolizes a humbling, heartwarming trend: So many of those helped by this free program stick around to pay it back and pay it forward, becoming volunteers, advocates, and ambassadors.

Their voices are invaluable.

“For communities that we consider underserved, there’s a lack of trust,” says Ralph Hawthorne, manager of the Atlanta program. “They see a lot of people come and go, and making promises and breaking promises, or having underlying agendas. Here today and gone tomorrow. When you develop these, what we call ‘credible messengers,’ they’re undisputable. People have a tendency to believe and trust in a program that has been endorsed by one of their peers.”

Pets for Life helped spay and neuter Victoria Santiago’s six shih tzu-Chihuahua mixes. Staff have also assisted with vet bills, donated crates, and even dropped by for some in-home training. Now, Santiago helps make phone calls, particularly to Spanish-speaking clients. She enters data. She helps at events. She even shares stories of how spay/neuter has helped her household—specifically, by cutting down on the territorial urine marking.

“In the summertime, I was laid off,” she says. “And Janice actually said, ‘I know you’re not working. If you need food ... whatever you need for your animals, you call me, and I’m there.’ So that was awesome. That’s why, anything I can help for HSUS, I’ll be there.”



THE CALL WOKE MAXWELL EARLY one morning in Chicago: Mayhem had been living up to his name. First, Denise Compton's black-and-white pit bull had gotten into the garbage, cutting his mouth on a metal tray. Then, for good measure, he'd eaten rat poisoning.

The dog is a total lover, but he'll bark ferociously at night when "drug heads" run down the narrow walkway past Compton's front door. And once, he barked frantically to alert her daughter that her boyfriend was having a seizure in the bathroom. This morning, though, he was the one in trouble: "The vet or whatever there said, '[If] you ain't got no money today, you might as well let him die,'" Compton remembers.

"Laurie wasn't having it. So she paid for it."

Months later, the Compton house marks the first stop on a neighborhood tour as the Chicago team greets representatives from Stray Rescue of St. Louis and the Jefferson Parish (La.) SPCA—two groups recently awarded PetSmart Charities grants to start Pets for Life models in their cities.

As Mayhem works the room, Compton is asked if she has any advice for the out-of-town guests: "Just try to meet with somebody that's got animals. If you see them walking on the street or whatever, just introduce yourself and tell them what we do, because I'm quite sure a lot of people will appreciate [it]. Because they do want to get their dogs some shots, get them spayed, and get some help with them, instead of just letting them go and being stray."

She's then asked how she got connected with the program. "My daughter's boyfriend's cousin," she replies, and everyone laughs. It's the perfect answer.

The next stop is Lawndale Community Church's Hope House, a Christian recovery home for men released from prison or battling addiction. Along one wall are photos of graduates, labeled with the year they left and the jobs they moved on to—teacher, bus driver, building maintenance supervisor. As many as 50 men can find shelter here, and living among them now are two cats and three small kittens. Pets for Life helped spay one of the adult cats and, once the kittens are weaned, will do the same for the second. It's also supplied food and kitty litter.

Before the tour continues, one man tells Lamberti—now Pets for Life program manager—that he struggles daily with wanting to do drugs, to go back to his old life. It is the cats, though, who keep him straight. As Lamberti relays later: "He said, 'I wake up. I go, I hold

the cats. I feed the cats. And taking care of those cats keeps me from doing the things I'm tempted to do.'" The man is concerned now about the cats having to sleep on the floor. So before he leaves, Lamberti explains how to take two cardboard boxes, create an opening, and build a house with blankets.

The next morning, the first day of fall arrives with a vengeance—wind, rain, and shivering temperatures. It's not enough to deter

Nicholas Herrera and Raymond Gallardo, though. The two are the first to arrive for Chicago's inaugural Pets for Life outreach event, forming the line with their pit bulls at 7 a.m.—some three hours before the free vaccinations are scheduled to begin.

"Especially right now, times are a little tough and hard," Herrera says. "I want my babies to be healthy and stay vaccinated, so this event is pretty good. It's very good, actually."

All told, 371 dogs and 45 cats will eventually follow, volunteer veterinarians handling the vaccinations. The trainees from Missouri and Louisiana are thrown into the fire, helping where needed.

"We're so excited to bring this amazing program back to our community," says Jason Shipkowski, with Stray Rescue of St. Louis. Adds Robin Beaulieu, Jefferson Parish Animal Shelter director, after singing "Happy Birthday" to one 80-year-old in line and persuading another owner to neuter her 13 pups: "My heart is just so full."

A day later, they'll disperse, back to St. Louis, back to New Orleans, and eventually for Pets for Life staffers, on to Los Angeles—this idea, this enthusiasm taking hold, and then speeding forward in many directions. ■

■ **ON THE iPad:** View more imagery from the Pets for Life program.

*So many of those helped by
this free program stick around
to pay it back and pay it
forward, becoming volunteers,
advocates, and ambassadors.
Their voices are invaluable.*

Volunteers Michael Haiman and Dr. Derrick Landini of the Animal Ark Veterinary Clinic vaccinate a dog during September's outreach event in Chicago.

